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SDI: A Safer Way to Keep the Peace

Remarks by President Ronald Reagan,
at a briefing on the Strategic Defense
Initiative, August 6, 1986.

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Thank you very much, and greetings to Secretary Weinberger and General Abrahamson. I hope you haven't said everything I'm going to say. I'm grateful to have this opportunity to speak with you and to thank you for all you're doing to keep America in the forefront of scientific and technological change. Our country's security today relies as much on the genius and creativity of scientists as it does on the courage and dedication of those in the military services. It also relies on those with the wisdom to recognize innovation when they see it and to shepherd change over the obstacles and through the maze. It takes a special person, endowed with vision and tenacity, to overcome political and bureaucratic inertia; and many of you here today are just this kind of special people, and I want you to know that your President and your country are grateful. And if I'm not being too presumptuous, I think history will remember you, too.

There are three stages of reaction to any new idea, as Arthur C. Clarke, a brilliant writer with a fine scientific mind, once noted. First, "It's crazy—don't waste my time." Second, "It's possible, but it's not worth doing." And finally, "I always said it was a good idea."

When I notice how much support tax simplification seems to have attracted as of late, I can't help but think of Clarke's observation. Well, one sometimes has to live with opposition to proposals such as changing the tax code, but when the same kind of skepticism stands in the way of the national security of our country, it can be perilous.

Clearly, intelligent and well-meaning individuals can be trapped by a mind-set, a way of thinking that prevents them from seeing beyond what has already been done and makes them uncomfortable with what is unfamiliar. And this mind-set is perhaps our greatest obstacle in regard to SDI.

We're at a critical point now on national security issues, and we need your help. Many of our citizens are still unaware that today we are absolutely defenseless against the fastest, most destructive weapons man has ever created—ballistic missiles. Yet, there are still those who want to cut off, or severely cut back, our ability to investigate the feasibility of such defenses. Congressional action on the defense authorization bill is coinciding with increasing diplomatic activity with

the Soviet Union.

Yet, at the same time, we're in the midst of a budget fight which could take away the very leverage we need to deal with the Soviets successfully.

Back in 1983, I challenged America's scientific community to develop an alternative to our total reliance on the threat of nuclear retaliation, an alternative based on protecting innocent people rather than avenging them; an alternative that would be judged effective by how many lives it could save, rather than how many lives it could destroy.

All of you know that during the past three decades, deterrence has been based on our ability to use offensive weapons to retaliate against any attack. Once an American president even had to make the excruciating decision to use such weapons in our defense. Isn't it time that we took steps that will permit us to do something about nuclear weapons, rather than simply continue to live with them in fear? And this is what our SDI research is all about, and there can be no better time than today, the 41st anniversary of Hiroshima, to rededicate ourselves to finding a safer way to keep the peace.

Many people believe the answer lies not in SDI, but only in reaching arms control agreements. Trust and understanding alone, it is said, will lead to arms control. But let's not kid ourselves, it's realism, not just trust, that is going to make it possible for adversaries, like the Soviet Union and the United States, to reach effective arms reduction agreements. Our SDI program has provided an historic opportunity; one that enhances the prospects for reducing the number of nuclear weapons. Technology can make it possible for both sides, realistically, without compromising their own security, to reduce their arsenals. And the fear that one side might cheat—might have a number of missiles above the agreed upon limit—could be offset by effective defenses. Clearly, by making offensive nuclear missiles less reliable, we make agreements to reduce their number more attainable. Particularly is that true where one side now is an economic basket case because of the massive arms buildup that it's been conducting over the last few decades—the Soviet Union.

There has been progress. There's a serious prospect today for arms reductions, not just arms control; and

that by itself is a great change, and it can be traced to our Strategic Defense Initiative. SDI can take the profit out of the Soviet buildup of offensive weapons and, in time, open new opportunities by building on today's and tomorrow's technologies.

I say this fully aware of the Soviet campaign to convince the world that terminating our SDI program is a prerequisite to any arms agreement. This clamoring is nothing new. It also has preceded steps we've taken to modernize our strategic forces. It was especially loud, for example, as we moved to offset the unprovoked and unacceptable Soviet buildup of intermediate-range missiles aimed at our allies by deploying our Pershing IIs and cruise missiles.

When I made it clear that we would no longer base our strategic force decisions on the flawed SALT treaties—and let me add that that action was taken when there was ample evidence that the Soviet Union was already in clear violation of key SALT provisions—the cry went up that it was the death knell of arms control and the beginning of a new, even more destructive nuclear arms race.

Well, let me just point out, in case no one noticed, the naysayers' predictions have been about as accurate as the time my old boss, Harry Warner, of Warner Brothers' film company, said when sound films first came in, "Who the hell wants to hear an actor talk?"

Today we continue to negotiate with the Soviets and they are negotiating with us. In fact, their recent proposals—in stark contrast to those gloomy predictions—are somewhat more forthcoming than those of the past. We are giving serious consideration to what the Soviets have recently laid upon the table in response to our own concrete reduction proposals. Also, we are looking forward to the next summit between General Secretary Gorbachev and me, as we agreed upon last November, where nuclear arms reduction will be one of several significant issues to be discussed.

Forecasting is not useful, but let me just say again, I am optimistic. It is demonstrably in the interest of both our countries to reduce the resources that we commit to weapons. If the Soviet Union wants arms reduction—strategic, chemical, or conventional—the United States stands ready to commit itself to a fair and verifiable agreement.

As for SDI, let me again affirm, we are willing to explore how to share its benefits with the Soviet Union, which itself has long been involved in strategic defense programs. This will help to demonstrate what I have been emphasizing all along—that we seek no unilateral advantage through the SDI.

There's been some speculation that in my recent letter to General Secretary Gorbachev, I decided to seek some sort of "grand compromise" to trade away SDI in exchange for getting the Soviets to join with us in the offensive reductions. Now, to those who have been publicizing what is supposed to be in that letter—aren't they offended to find out that they don't know what's in that letter because no one's really told them? I know. (Laughter.) Let me reassure you right here and now that our response to demands that we cut off or delay research and testing and close shop is:

No way. SDI is no bargaining chip, it is the path to a safe and more secure future. And the research is not, and never has been, negotiable. (Applause). As I've said before, it's the number of offensive missiles that needs to be reduced, not efforts to find a way to defend mankind against these deadly weapons.

Many of the vocal opponents of SDI, some of them with impressive scientific credentials, claim our goal is impossible; it can't be done, they say. Well, I think it's becoming increasingly apparent to everyone that those claiming it can't be done have clouded vision. Sometimes smoke gets in your eyes. And sometimes politics gets in your eyes. If this project is as big a waste of time and money as some have claimed, why have the Soviets been involved in strategic defense themselves for so long, and why are they anxious that we stop?

I understand that General Abrahamson has already briefed you on the progress we've made. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the General and his team. They're all first string and doing a terrific job.

I'm more than happy with the strides made in our ability to track and intercept missiles before they reach their targets. The goal we seek is a system that can intercept deadly ballistic missiles in all phases of their flight, including, and in particular, the boost phase—right where they're coming out of the silos. Our research is aimed at finding a way of protecting people, not missiles. And that's my highest priority and will remain so.

And to accomplish this, we're proceeding as fast as we can toward developing a full range of promising technologies. I know there are those who are getting a bit antsy, but to deploy systems of limited effectiveness now would deter limited funds and—or divert them—and delay our main research. It could well erode support for the program before it's permitted to reach its potential.

Now I'll talk about Jack Swigert, an astronaut, an American hero of the first order, who once said, "I was privileged to be one of the few who viewed our earth from the moon, and that vision taught me that technology and commitment can overcome any challenge." Well, Jack tragically died of cancer and was cut short from the great contributions he would have made to his country and to mankind. He was the kind of individual who made this the great land of freedom and enterprise that it is. His can-do spirit is alive and well in America today.

We and the other free people of the world are on the edge of a giant leap into the next century. That turning point in thirteen and a half years, will not only mark the end of a century, but the beginning of a new millennium. And the free people of the world are ready for it. Our research on effective defenses helps to point the way to a safer future. The best minds from some allied countries are already working with us in this noble endeavor, and we believe others will join this effort before too long. In SDI, as elsewhere, we've put technology that almost boggles the mind to work—increasing our productivity and expanding the limits of human potential. The relationship between

freedom and human progress has never been more apparent.

But our freedom and security, as we are sorely aware, depend on more than technology. Both diplomacy and our internal debate are at a critical juncture, and your active support is imperative. Together, we must make it plain that this is the worst time to undermine vital defense programs and take away America's needed negotiating leverage.

If we cut back on our own forces unilaterally, we will leave our adversaries no incentive to reduce their own weapons. And we will leave the next generations not a safer, more stable world, but a far more dangerous one. The future is literally in our hands. And it is SDI that is helping us to regain control over our own destiny.

Just one last little incident, if you aren't aware of it already, that might be helpful to you and some people you might be discussing this subject with. Back when

Fulton was inventing the steamboat and it came into reality, there was an effort made to sell it to Napoleon in France. And that great General, with all his wisdom, said, "Are you trying to tell me that you can have a boat that will sail against the tide and the currents and the winds without any sails?" He said, "Don't bother me with such foolishness." (Laughter.) Well, we know where the foolishness lay, and let's not make the same mistakes.

I want to thank you all again for all you are doing to keep our country out in front, to keep secure and free. Don't let up. God bless you. (Applause.)

I'll just leave you with this thought once again. When the time has come and the research is complete, yes, we're going to deploy. (Applause.)

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